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## FORESHADOWING AND SUSPENSE IN THE EURIPIDEAN PROLOG

BY DONALD CLIVE STUART

One of the most difficult tasks which face a dramatist is to convey to the audience the facts of the past and present necessary for an understanding of the plot of the play, and, at the same time, to arouse interest in the plot as quickly as possible by creating suspense as to the outcome of the situation. The opening scenes of the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles are evidence that the Greek playwrights became masters of the difficult art of exposition and were able to employ almost all the devices known by the dramatist to be effective in arousing the interest of the spectators in the plot. Euripides, perhaps the most sophisticated of the three playwrights, deliberately chose to open most of his plays with a monolog; and from the time of Aristophanes down to the present day, he has been alternately attacked and defended for this practice.

We shall not attempt to discuss the question of the artistic value of the prolog as a means of exposition as compared with the expository scenes of Aeschylus and Sophocles; but we shall try to point out that practically all the Euripidean prologs, in addition to serving as a means of acquainting the audience with certain facts of the past, present and sometimes of the future, perform another very important function, *i. e.*, of foreshadowing and arousing suspense. Let it be said immediately, however, that foreshadowing as a term of dramatic technique, does not mean to foretell plainly events that actually come to pass in the future, nor does it mean to forestall interest in the plot in the slightest degree. To foreshadow signifies to give information, in a more or less vague manner, but in a way to arouse curiosity, as to what *may* happen in the future.

Both Lessing<sup>1</sup> and Commer<sup>2</sup> pointed out correctly that in order to enjoy to the utmost certain plays of Euripides, such as the *Ion*, the audience must be informed of certain facts, such as the relationship of Creusa to Ion, set before them in the prolog. Indeed, Commer says that the aim of the Euripidean prolog is to arouse pity and fear by narrating past events and by foretelling future events. At first glance, it might seem that Commer recognized the element of foreshadowing and of suspense in the prolog; but close examination of his discussion of the separate plays shows conclusively that he is emphasizing foretelling, not foreshadowing, although he defends Euripides from the charge of forestalling the interest. Furthermore, although Commer uses the expression *metu suspensi*, he does not recognize at all the fact that or the reason why Euripides states in the prolog certain facts or supposed facts fraught with hope or fear, as the case may demand. Suspense is not fear, but is a combination of hope and fear; and Euripides, a skillful dramatist, knows when to stress the element of hope, and when to emphasize the element of fear. Commer refers to that fear which is aroused by our knowledge from the beginning in the *Hippolytus* that Phedra and Hippolytus will die; but that is not dramatic suspense. We shall attempt to show that generally toward the end of almost every Euripidean prolog come lines of foreshadowing, which arouse suspense in the mind of the spectator as to what may happen and which stress the note of either hope or fear according to the exigencies of the situation at hand. Furthermore, we shall point out that often these lines actually mislead the spectator, that Euripides purposely foreshadows events in the prolog which do not take place, and that in certain plays the hope or fear aroused by those lines gives way to the opposite emotion in order that the spectator may be held in doubt as to the final issue of the plot and that the situation may remain in the balance.

In the prolog to the *Alcestis*, Apollo informs the audience that Alcestis is dying and that Thanatos is coming to conduct her to the halls of Hades. Any normal spectator will immediately infer that this is the end of Alcestis, if not of the play. Unless one takes into consideration preknowledge of the myth on the part of the

<sup>1</sup> Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 48 u. 49 Stücke.

<sup>2</sup> F. Commer, *De Prologorum Euripideorum Causa ac Ratione*, Bonn, 1854, p. 29.

audience—which would be manifestly unfair in such a discussion—the possibility of the resurrection of Alcestis and of a happy outcome of the situation would not occur to anyone. In the next scene, Apollo pleads with Thanatos to spare Alcestis; but the messenger of death is obdurate. Finally, Apollo says that someone will come to take Alcestis from Thanatos. The ray of hope dawns; but does not the spectator believe that Alcestis must be rescued while she is still alive? Otherwise, if Apollo knows that she can be saved even after death, why does he plead with Thanatos? But Alcestis dies, and her resurrection comes as a surprising *coup de théâtre*. Euripides has indulged in false foreshadowing in order to arouse suspense.

Haigh calls attention to the fact that the prolog to the *Ion* deliberately misleads the spectator.<sup>3</sup> Hermes, foreshadowing the outcome, says:

He (Apollo) shall give Xuthus, when he entereth,  
His own (Apollo's) child, saying to him, "Lo, thy son,"  
That the lad, coming home, made known may be  
Unto Creusa, Loxias' deed abide  
Unknown. . . . (69-73).<sup>4</sup>

It is true that Apollo bestows Ion upon Xuthus as if Xuthus were the father of Ion, as is foretold in the prolog; but Creusa does not for this reason accept Ion as her son. On the contrary, she arouses great suspense by planning to slay this supposed son of Xuthus; and the manner in which she is saved from this terrible act is wholly surprising. Furthermore, in order to bring about the recognition scene between the mother and the son, Loxias' deed has to be made known, in spite of the fact that Hermes foretold that the amour between Creusa and Apollo would remain secret. This is more than false foreshadowing. It is false foretelling. At the end of the play, Athena says that the divine seer meant to keep this secret until the truth could be proclaimed at Athens; but evidently even the intention of a god must give way to the desire of the playwright to arouse suspense and cause surprise.

In the *Phoenissae*, Jocasta gives in great detail the facts of the tragic situation of her two sons. The tragedy has an unhappy outcome. Therefore, according to excellent dramatic practice followed as a rule by all Greek playwrights, the note of hope should be

<sup>3</sup> A. L. Haigh, *The Tragic Drama of the Greeks*, Oxford, 1896, p. 241.

<sup>4</sup> The translation of A. S. Way.

stressed at the beginning of the action. The last words of Jocasta in this monolog correctly shed a ray of light over the gloom. She has prevailed upon her sons to form a truce and to meet before they join battle. She prays to Zeus that her sons may be reconciled. This passage plainly foreshadows the obligatory scene of the play. It gives the element of hope necessary for dramatic suspense, and would cause an audience to believe that a happy outcome of the situation is very possible.

The first speech of Aethra in the *Supplikes* is not strictly a formal prolog addressed to the audience, but is rather an integral part of the play, since it takes the form of a prayer and since the chorus and Adrastus are already on the stage. However, even in this speech we find foreshadowing lines preparing for a scene to come, when Aethra tells us that she has sent a herald to summon Theseus to the aid of the suppliants. Thus, in spite of the fact that this tragedy is so poorly constructed that there is little chance for dramatic foreshadowing, we find traces of Euripides' general practice in the opening speech, of "carrying forward the interest of the audience," as Mr. William Archer would say.<sup>5</sup>

Euripides' skill in the foreshadowing appears to excellent advantage in the formal prolog to the *Hercules Furens*. Amphitryon tells us that Hercules has not returned from the house of Pluto, that the children of Hercules have no hope save to cling to the altar of Zeus, since Lycus aims to slay the children, their mother, and even Amphitryon himself. "Desperate of life" they are "barred from homes whose doors are sealed" (53-54). Thus suspense is immediately aroused. One gains the impression that almost all hope is gone. Since Hercules is in the realms of the dead, one hardly expects him to return; but the ray of hope necessary to keep suspense from being merely fear is given by Amphitryon when he says to Megara:

Daughter, a fair-wind course may yet befall  
From storms of present ills for thee and me.  
Yet may he come—my son, thy lord may come (95-97).

Thus, the appearance of Hercules, just at the moment when he alone can save the children is not wholly unexpected; but nevertheless the suspense caused by the knowledge that Lycus seeks to

<sup>5</sup> William Archer, *Playmaking*, Boston, p. 185.

slay the children is ended by a dramatic *coup de théâtre* which comes as a great surprise. However, since the return of Hercules is almost unexpected, although strongly desired, the prolog gives the effect of false foreshadowing, since the events which we actually expect to take place—the murder of the children, their mother and Amphitryon—do not come to pass. Had the playwright actually foretold the arrival of Hercules, or even foreshadowed it more strongly, suspense and surprise would have been immeasurably reduced. On the other hand, the speech of Iris, which is practically a prolog to the second part of the tragedy, correctly foretells the murder of the children by Hercules. If we were not given to believe that the children would be slain by Hercules, the action of the play at this point would wander on in a seemingly aimless manner. There would be no suspense, but only a shock of surprise when the deed is done; and, when one of these elements must be sacrificed to the other, it is almost always, and certainly in this scene, surprise which must be given up, even though suspense is thereby reduced to fear.

Even in the prolog to the *Heracleidae*, in spite of the fact that the tragedy is poorly constructed, there is suspense aroused at the end of the prolog. Iolaus has told how Eurystheus causes the children of Hercules to be driven from every place of refuge, and now he cries out that he sees the herald of Eurystheus approaching, by whom the wanderers are still pursued at the command of the pitiless Eurystheus. Certainly, even at this play, no spectator would be inclined to leave the theatre after the prolog has foreshadowed this obligatory scene. There is no hint as to the dénouement of the plot.

The prolog of the *Hecuba* actually foretells that Polyxena must die, and that Hecuba will behold the body of Polydorus, whose phantom speaks the formal prolog; but these events are by no means the dénouement of the tragedy. Indeed, it is the sight of the body of Polydorus which causes the rest of the action to unfold, as Hecuba wreaks vengeance on Polymestor for the murder of her son at his hands. A part of the plot, and in this case a relatively small part, is foretold in order to catch the attention of the spectators; and then the major portion of the tragedy is enacted without even a hint having been given as to the vengeance of Hecuba and the trial scene before Agamemnon and its outcome.

It can be gathered from what has already been said that Euripides employs various methods to arouse curiosity and suspense; and in the opening scene of the *Troades* still another procedure is found. In this tragedy the prolog is not merely the monolog of Poseidon, but it includes the ensuing dialog between Poseidon and Athena, since the whole scene is an introduction to the play proper. It is true that neither the plot of the tragedy nor the dénouement is plainly foreshadowed. The only hint of the action given is that Agamemnon will take Cassandra as his slave, which is merely an episode in the development of the action. However, there is foreshadowing of events which occur after the close of the play. We find that Athena, once the enemy of the Trojans and active in causing the downfall of Troy and the resultant woe, now leagues herself with Poseidon as the enemy of the Greeks in order to wreak vengeance on them with storm and thunderbolts. This is to be done as the Argives sail home; and this event, although foreshadowed in the prolog, does not take place during the action of the play, but must happen, if at all, after the dénouement. Perhaps it is going too far to say that this foreshadowing gives rise to a concrete hope that these divine powers will interfere in behalf of the woeful Trojan women, yet hope is created by the very fact that two powerful divinities are known to be hostile to the Greeks and that vengeance is in the air. No spectator can possibly escape this impression. In this tragedy, with an unhappy outcome, the prolog correctly gives the impression that all is not lost, an impression which may be vague but none the less is strong enough to increase the poignancy of the suspense and the sadness of the final catastrophe. As far as the plot of the play is concerned Euripides has again indulged in what amounts to false foreshadowing. Had his aim been merely to foretell events after the close of the play, he would have transferred this information to the epilog of the tragedy, where it is canonically found.

Helen, in the tragedy of that name, after telling in the prolog of her situation, asks why she should live on, and straightway answers her own question, saying that Hermes has prophesied that she shall return to Sparta with her lord. She also creates suspense by informing us that the son of the dead monarch pursues her; but the important point is, that were she not buoyed up by this hope of finding Menelaus, her impulse would be to commit suicide. In

this case, Euripides has actually foreshadowed, indeed has practically foretold the real dénouement. It might seem, at first glance, that he has made a technical error in so doing, for, as a rule, stress should be placed upon fear at the beginning of a play with a happy outcome and *vice versa*. However, if this passage is examined in the light of the next scene, it will be found that Euripides constructed this play with skillful foreshadowing and preparation, for, in the next scene, Teucer brings the rumor that Menelaus is dead, and a moment later we find Helen trying to decide by what means she can die with honor—the noose or the dagger. Had Euripides stressed the note of fear in the prolog, the news brought by Teucer would be a mere repetition of our first impression. The playwright correctly chose to make the pendulum of suspense swing from hope to despair, which is far more effective than having it swing from fear to despair. The true foreshadowing is more dramatic in this case. It would have been a grave mistake to have Helen believe that Menelaus is dead and then have Teucer reassure her.

The only other possibility in this situation would be to have Helen express her fear in the prolog that Menelaus is dead and then delete the scene with Teucer. This is actually the way that Euripides handles a parallel situation in the *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Iphigenia believes as the result of a dream, as she informs us in the prolog, that Orestes is dead. No one confirms this impression, for there is no need of any repetition of the idea. Here we have the element of fear emphasized in the opening scene of a tragedy with a happy ending; and, once more, suspense is created by means of false foreshadowing. Euripides has again handled the situation with consummate technical skill.

In the *Andromache*, in a somewhat but not entirely similar manner, Andromache tells us in the prolog that Hermione, aided by Menelaus, seeks to slay her and that, fearing for the life of her child, she has had the boy conveyed secretly to the "house of another." In the next scene, the foreboding fear of Andromache for her child is changed into certain fear when the Handmaid informs her that Menelaus and Hermione know that she has spirited the child away and that they intend to slay him. This is not a mere repetition of the idea of fear, but it is an intensification of dramatic suspense and a step forward in the development of the action by turning Andromache's apprehension into certain fear.



On the other hand, Andromache tells us that Neoptolemus has gone to Delphi to see

If haply prayer for those transgressions past  
Might win the Gods' grace for days to be (54-55).

But the hope aroused by these lines is not fulfilled, for Neoptolemus is slain. Therefore, the foreshadowing in the prolog, far from hinting at the actual dénouement of the play, rather misleads the spectator. The calamity which is foreshadowed does not come to pass, for Andromache and her child escape; but the calamity unforeshadowed in the prolog—the death of Neoptolemus—does take place. Also, as in the *Hercules Furens* and the *Hecuba*, the prolog only foreshadows possible events of the first part of the play.

In the prolog to the *Orestes*, Electra gives the information that this day the vote is to be taken as to whether Orestes and she shall be put to death. She says:

The appointed day is this,  
Whereon the Argive state shall cast the vote,  
Whether we twain must die, by stoning die,  
Or through our own necks plunge the whetted steel.  
Yet one hope have we of escape from death;  
For Menelaus from Troy hath reached the land (48-53).

As Mr. Archer says of another play we can say of this tragedy: "This gives us a definite point to which to look forward, while leaving the actual course of events entirely undefined. It fulfills one of the great ends of craftsmanship, in foreshadowing without forestalling an intensely interesting conjuncture of affairs."<sup>6</sup> These lines turn out to be a remarkable combination of true and false foreshadowing. It is true that the situation of the matricides is almost desperate and that the Argive state is to decide their fate. That fact alone is enough to create suspense. Furthermore, the lines plainly imply that if the brother and sister are adjudged guilty, they will be sentenced to death or will be allowed to commit suicide. Their one hope lies in the fact that Menelaus has returned; but this hope fails them early in the play. They are condemned to death, but are to be allowed to commit suicide. As far as the prolog is concerned, one would naturally expect this event to be the outcome of the play; but the plot suddenly takes a new turn which

<sup>6</sup> *Loc. cit.*

is entirely unforeshadowed. Electra and Orestes, abandoned by Menelaus, decide to slay Helen; and they and the audience believe that this deed has been accomplished. They are also ready to slay Hermione when Apollo unexpectedly intervenes and saves the life of everyone and tells how he has rescued Helen in a miraculous manner. Thus the foreshadowing in the prolog is entirely deceiving as far as the dénouement is concerned; and yet there is just enough truth in it to make the unfolding of the plot intensely interesting and theatrically effective, even if it is not dramatic in the best sense of the word.

In the prolog to the *Bacchae*, the foreshadowing is vague but compels interest. Dionysus, after describing the situation, threatens that he will prove his godhead to Pentheus and to all the Thebans. This is sufficient to create suspense. Furthermore, he says:

If Thebes in wrath  
Take arms to chase her Bacchantes from the hills,  
Leading my Maenads I will clash in fight (50-52).

One would be inclined to expect a battle of some kind from these lines; but the plot unfolds in quite a different manner. The words of Dionysus foretell his triumph, but they hardly give a hint as to the real action of the play. The dénouement is a surprise as far as the prolog is concerned.

The Nurse in the prolog to the *Medea* forebodes ill, but she does not foretell what will happen. Being a mortal, she has not the power to do so. She says of Medea:

She loaths her babes, joys not to behold them.  
And what she may devise I dread to think.  
Grim is her spirit, one that will not brook  
Mishandling: yea, I know her, and I fear  
Lest to her bridal bower she softly steal  
And through her own heart thrust the whetted knife,  
Or slay the king and him that weds the child,  
And get herself some doom yet worse thereby (36-43).

Does anyone know what will happen? Would any normal spectator consent to leave the theatre without having his curiosity satisfied at least? As a matter of fact, Medea slays her children. This deed is foreshadowed only in the vaguest way, if at all, by these lines. Only from line 90 on do we really begin to dread the death of the children. Of the events which the Nurse plainly foreshadows in

this monolog, only one takes place. The king does meet his doom but he dies accidentally as the result of Medea's machinations, and his death was not planned by her. Medea neither slays Jason, nor does she commit suicide, nor does she involve herself in some worse doom, but escapes in triumph. On the other hand, she kills the daughter of the king, although this deed is not hinted at in the monolog. Thus, while the Nurse arouses suspense by her foreshadowing, the audience is misled in such a way that the actual events of the play come as astounding surprises, as far as the prolog is concerned.

The four lines beginning "Lest to her bridal bower" etc. are bracketed by most scholars as being a relatively late interpolation. Professor Frank believes that they may be dated as post-Didymean.<sup>7</sup> His arguments based upon the scholia and textual criticism are very sound; but his sole aesthetic reason for rejecting them is open to question in the light of what we believe to have shown is the practice of Euripides. He claims that "the whole passage in question very inappropriately gives anticipation of the plot which has not yet assumed definite shape." We consider these lines very appropriate and as representing an extremely artistic handling of dramatic technique. Even if they are deleted, we may point to the foreboding and the vague foreshadowing in the remaining lines cited above. Indeed, let us freely grant that they are a later interpolation. However, their presence is excellent evidence that they were introduced into the play by someone—probably an actor—who was fully cognizant of the dramatic value of such lines at the beginning of a play and who, conscious of the general practice of Euripides, interpolated them in order to arouse greater suspense by foreshadowing.

Of the tragedies of Euripides which open with a formal prolog, only two remain which do not conform entirely to this general practice of creating suspense by foreshadowing. The *Electra* has a prolog which gives no hint as to the dénouement of the play. Even in this prolog, however, there is a certain amount of suspense caused by the announcement of Auturgus that Aegisthus has set a price on the head of Orestes, especially as Auturgus gives the impression, a moment later, that Orestes may return. As for the *Hippolytus*,

<sup>7</sup> Tenney Frank: *A Stichometric Scholium to the Medea of Euripides*, *The Decennial Publications of the University of Chicago*, Chicago, 1904, p. 68.

the foreshadowing is true and the dénouement is foretold; but this is the only play in which the prolog arouses fear unmodified by any hope and at the same time gives the dénouement in words not to be doubted. Yet it is a commonplace of Euripidean criticism to say that the prolog foretells the ending of the tragedy, whereas, in the great majority of cases, nothing is further from the truth.

We believe that we have shown that, as a rule, Euripides arouses suspense in the prolog by a skillful use of true or false foreshadowing, or both, as the case demands. This is done in such a dramatic way that, as soon as the prolog is spoken, no normal spectator could be induced to leave the theatre. A modern dramatist considers himself fortunate if he can place his audience in this frame of mind by the end of the first act. Miss Evelyn Spring, the latest writer to deal with the subject of the Euripidean prolog, points out that "in only two of Euripides' plays (the *Ion* and the *Bacchae*) are the explanations supplied in the prolog indispensable in order that the dramatic action which follows may be intelligible."<sup>8</sup> She calls the prolog "undramatic," and believes that "to consider the Euripidean prolog, in general, an essential part of the play, is an injustice to the poet."<sup>9</sup> Lessing pointed out long ago that the artistic value of the Euripidean prolog is not to be tested by the question as to whether it is indispensable to the understanding of the plot. Euripides plainly aimed at something far more important than mere exposition in his formal prolog, as both Lessing<sup>10</sup> and Commer<sup>11</sup> partially saw. The point is that, if the prolog is done away with the plot may still be understood and followed; but if the prolog is left out, suspense, the very foundation of the structure of the drama, is immeasurably and perhaps irreparably weakened. Thus we cannot admit that the Euripidean prolog is undramatic and, in general, not an essential part of the drama.

There is certainly no greater admirer of Euripides than Professor Gilbert Murray, who, although he finally justifies the existence of the prolog on different grounds, writes of the prolog as follows:

"It is a long speech with no action to speak of; and it tells us not only the present situation of the characters—which is rather dull—but also

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<sup>8</sup> Evelyn Spring, *A Study of Exposition in Greek Tragedy*, Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, 1917, p. 182.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 186 f.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*

what is going to happen to them—which seems to us to spoil the rest of the play. . . . But why does it let out the secret of what is coming? Why does it spoil the excitement beforehand? Because, we must answer, there is no secret; and the poet does not aim at that sort of excitement. A certain amount of plot-interest there certainly is: we are never told exactly what will happen, but only what sort of thing; or we are told what will happen but not how it will happen.”<sup>12</sup>

In the light of what we have shown we would amend these statements to read as follows:

The prolog is a speech of varying length, and near the end it indicates either a part or the whole of the problem of the plot. This is a very important element in dramatic technique. It tells the present situation of the characters, which is extremely interesting because the situation is remarkable or tragic or both. It also tells what *may* happen to the characters and certain things which do or do not happen to them, according to the demands of artistic technique in each case. This arouses interest in the rest of the play immediately because we wish to see how the problem is solved and how the situation develops. It does not let out the secret of what is coming in such a way as to forestall the excitement; but, in connection with the next scene or by itself, it creates suspense by true or false foreshadowing, or both. A great deal of plot-interest there certainly is. There is a secret and the playwright aims at this sort of excitement. We are told once in unequivocal words, with nothing to cast doubt on them, exactly what will happen (*Hippolytus*). But generally we are told what thing we may hope or fear will happen. Or we are told what will happen and we find that it does not happen with the expected result (*Orestes* and *Electra* condemned to death). Or we are told how it will happen and find that it does not happen in this way (*Ion*).

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<sup>12</sup> Gilbert Murray, *Euripides and His Age*, New York, pp. 205-6.